CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	NorthWestern Energy Columbus-Rapelje to Chrome Junction 100kV Transmission Line Easement
Proposed Implementation Date:	Spring 2015
Proponent:	NorthWestern Energy
Location:	Section 8, Township 1 North, Range 19 East Section 10, Township 1 North, Range 19 East N½NE¼ of Section 12, Township 1 North, Range 18 East
County:	Stillwater County

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

The Proponent, NorthWestern Energy, is requesting 60' wide easements across three parcels of Trust land in Stillwater County for a new 100kV transmission line. The easement requests are part of a larger project for the construction of a new 100kV transmission line that will start approximately 15 miles north of Columbus at the Columbus-Rapelje substation, then head west/southwest to a crossing of the Yellowstone River west of Reed Point and then continue south to its termination at a proposed new substation located approximately five miles south of Nye. This line will be the first phase of a multi-year five phase system upgrade in Carbon and Stillwater Counties. According to information provided by NorthWestern Energy the project will *"…mitigate low voltage violations in the Columbus, Chrome Junction and Red Lodge areas to adhere to NERC [North American Electric Reliability Corporation] Transmission Planning Criteria TPL-001 (requirements for normal operational conditions) and TPL-002 (requirements for the loss of a single bulk system element). This project will address the involuntary load shedding at Stillwater Mine for loss of a single system element (involuntary load shedding is also a violation of TPL-002)."* Additionally, the information notes that *"… [t]he transmission deficiency consists of voltage violations on the present system when the current Columbus-Absarokee-Chrome Junction line is out of service. As a result of this outage, Stillwater Mine is required to curtail load in order to maintain voltage at an acceptable level on the 50kV system. The curtailment of this load represents a safety issue for Stillwater Mine as they are faced with potential evacuation of many underground mine workers. Furthermore, curtailment of load due to the loss of a single transmission element is a violation of NERC Transmission Policy Planning Standard TPL-002."*

The DNRC Southern Land Office (SLO) and NorthWestern Energy have been discussing this proposed new transmission line since March of 2013. NorthWestern provided draft alignments to the SLO and the SLO provided back comments or concerns regarding the proposed line location on potentially impacted parcels. In addition to the three parcels in this EA, there will be three more applications that will be submitted for the project. The parcels in this EA were submitted first since they were the most straight-forward and no significant issues were noted by the SLO in reviewing the draft alignments and in a subsequent field review. The remaining easements, including a crossing of the Yellowstone River west of Reed Point, will be submitted later this spring as NorthWestern refines the line location and works with adjoining landowners on a final alignment.

NorthWestern Energy is trying to build the line under a statutory exclusion from the Major Facility Siting Act (MFSA) found in MCA §75-20-104(8)(a)(i). The exclusion would be triggered if NorthWestern were able to obtain right-of-way agreements or options from more than 75% of the landowners who collectively own more than 75% of the property along the centerline. It currently appears that NorthWestern will be able to meet the requirements for this exclusion from the MFSA.

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

1. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AGENCIES, GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CONTACTED:
Provide a brief chronology of the scoping and ongoing involvement for this project.

NorthWestern Energy has conducted some public notification; one was through a half page public notice that was in the Billings Gazette on 31 January 2013 regarding the proposed transmission line. They also have information regarding the project on their web site. Additionally, NorthWestern was required to obtain lessee settlements on the 3 parcels proposed from the State grazing lessees.

The DNRC Southern Land Office (SLO) sent a scoping letter to the Crow Tribal Preservation Officer to solicit any comments or concerns regarding all of the potentially impacted parcels. No response was received to the scoping letter or a follow-up email regarding the project and the impacted state land.

No other public scoping was conducted by the SLO for this project.

2. OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES WITH JURISDICTION, LIST OF PERMITS NEEDED:

Stillwater County: Encroachment Permit
Montana Department of Transportation: Encroachment Permit
US Forest Service: Easement
US Bureau of Land Management: Easement

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

Proposed Alternative: Approve the request by NorthWestern Energy to issue a 60' easement for a new 100kV overhead transmission line on the three sections listed above in Stillwater County.

No Action Alternative: Deny the request by NorthWestern Energy to issue a 60' easement for a new 100kV overhead transmission line on the three sections listed above in Stillwater County.

III. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.*
- *Enter "NONE" If no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.*

4. GEOLOGY AND SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY AND MOISTURE:
Consider the presence of fragile, compactable or unstable soils. Identify unusual geologic features. Specify any special reclamation considerations. Identify any cumulative impacts to soils.

The proposed transmission line would be utilize H-shaped structures and on these three parcels the line parallels two other existing NorthWestern Energy transmission lines which utilize similar support structures. The soils in the proposed easement area generally consist of well-drained clay loams, with a portion of the easement area in Section 10 having constraints of slope and shallow depth to bedrock. No significant impacts to geology and soil quality, stability and moisture are expected by implementing the proposed action.

5. WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION:
Identify important surface or groundwater resources. Consider the potential for violation of ambient water quality standards, drinking water maximum contaminant levels, or degradation of water quality. Identify cumulative effects to water resources.

The proposed transmission line does not cross any creeks or other significant drainages located on the Trust land parcels. No significant adverse impacts to water quality, quantity or distribution are expected from implementing the proposed action

6. AIR QUALITY:

What pollutants or particulate would be produced? Identify air quality regulations or zones (e.g. Class I air shed) the project would influence. Identify cumulative effects to air quality.

There may be short-term isolated impacts from the construction equipment exhaust that is used to install the new transmission line. No significant impacts to air quality are expected from implementing the proposed action.

7. VEGETATION COVER, QUANTITY AND QUALITY:

What changes would the action cause to vegetative communities? Consider rare plants or cover types that would be affected. Identify cumulative effects to vegetation.

The proposed project would cause disturbance of vegetative cover due to the installation of the new H-shaped structures along the new easement route, in addition to the disturbance of the support and construction equipment used during installation. NorthWestern Energy will be responsible for reclaiming all disturbed areas on the Trust land once installation is complete. No significant adverse impacts to vegetative cover, quantity or quality are expected as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

8. TERRESTRIAL, AVIAN AND AQUATIC LIFE AND HABITATS:

Consider substantial habitat values and use of the area by wildlife, birds or fish. Identify cumulative effects to fish and wildlife.

A variety of big game (antelope and mule deer), small mammals, raptors, and birds use this area. The proposed construction activities could temporarily disrupt wildlife movement and patterns, while the proposed transmission line could cause avian fatalities due to electrocution or collision. One of the standard stipulations in easements issued by the State for overhead electric lines is that they are constructed in compliance with the latest pole construction techniques developed by the industry and the US Fish and Wildlife Service to minimize avian fatalities via electrocution or collision. No significant adverse impacts are expected by implementing the proposed action.

9. UNIQUE, ENDANGERED, FRAGILE OR LIMITED ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES:

Consider any federally listed threatened or endangered species or habitat identified in the project area. Determine effects to wetlands. Consider Sensitive Species or Species of special concern. Identify cumulative effects to these species and their habitat.

A proposed project area search of the Montana Natural Heritage Program database identified one vertebrate animal, Hoary Bat, which is listed as a species of concern or threatened species.

Hoary Bat is listed as a species of concern. The Montana Field Guide lists the preferred habitat as roosting in trees and potentially in other wooden structures. Other than the existing overhead electric transmission lines, there are no other wooden structures on the Trust land and there are not very many trees in this part of the county, especially on the Trust land. No significant adverse impacts are expected by implementing the proposed action.

10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:

Identify and determine effects to historical, archaeological or paleontological resources.

On 21 April 2014, SLO Land Use Planner Jeff Bollman performed a site inspection of all three parcels. The proposed easement routes across all three parcels were walked in their entirety and no historic or cultural resources were noted during the field inspection. No significant adverse impacts to historic or archaeological sites are expected as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

11. AESTHETICS:

Determine if the project is located on a prominent topographic feature, or may be visible from populated or scenic areas. What level of noise, light or visual change would be produced? Identify cumulative effects to aesthetics.

The proposed overhead transmission line would be constructed utilizing H-shaped structures. On these three parcels the proposed easement parallels two other existing NorthWestern Energy overhead transmission lines which utilize similar support structures. Those lines consist of a 161kV transmission line (80' easement granted in 1954) and 240kV transmission line (100' easement granted in 1968). Implementation of the proposed alternative through the construction of an third overhead transmission line parallel to the existing two lines is not expected to have a significant adverse impact to aesthetics.

12. DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES OF LAND, WATER, AIR OR ENERGY:

Determine the amount of limited resources the project would require. Identify other activities nearby that the project would affect. Identify cumulative effects to environmental resources.

No significant adverse impacts to environmental resources of land, water, air or energy are expected to occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

13. OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTS PERTINENT TO THE AREA:

List other studies, plans or projects on this tract. Determine cumulative impacts likely to occur as a result of current private, state or federal actions in the analysis area, and from future proposed state actions in the analysis area that are under MEPA review (scoped) or permitting review by any state agency.

The proponent will be submitting three additional easement applications for this same transmission line project. Two of the applications will be for land further south in Stillwater County and the other will be for crossing the Yellowstone River near Reed Point. Separate EA's will be prepared for those applications once a complete package is submitted.

IV. IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.*
- *Enter "NONE" If no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.*

14. HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY:

Identify any health and safety risks posed by the project.

No significant adverse impacts to human health and safety are expected to occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:

Identify how the project would add to or alter these activities.

No significant adverse impacts to industrial, commercial and agricultural activities and production are expected to occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

16. QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT:

Estimate the number of jobs the project would create, move or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to the employment market.

The proposed action will not have a significant adverse impact on the quantity and distribution of employment.

17. LOCAL AND STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUES:

Estimate tax revenue the project would create or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to taxes and revenue.

The proposed action will not have an adverse impact on tax revenue.

18. DEMAND FOR GOVERNMENT SERVICES:

Estimate increases in traffic and changes to traffic patterns. What changes would be needed to fire protection, police, schools, etc.? Identify cumulative effects of this and other projects on government services

The implementation of the proposed alternative will not generate any additional demands on governmental services.

19. LOCALLY ADOPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS AND GOALS:

List State, County, City, USFS, BLM, Tribal, and other zoning or management plans, and identify how they would affect this project.

Implementation of the proposed alternative will not conflict with any locally adopted plans.

20. ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES:

Identify any wilderness or recreational areas nearby or access routes through this tract. Determine the effects of the project on recreational potential within the tract. Identify cumulative effects to recreational and wilderness activities.

Section 12-1N-18E and Section 8-1N-19E both have legal public access from county roads, while Section 10-1N-19E is landlocked. The exact construction schedule is not known at this time, but if there was construction during hunting season, there could be a minor, temporary impact to recreational use on the accessible sections. The implementation of the proposed alternative is not expected to have a significant adverse impact on the recreational use of the three impacted parcels.

21. DENSITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AND HOUSING:

Estimate population changes and additional housing the project would require. Identify cumulative effects to population and housing.

No significant adverse impacts to density and distribution of population and housing would occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:

Identify potential disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities.

There are no native, unique or traditional lifestyles or communities in the vicinity that would be impacted by the proposed alternative.

23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:

How would the action affect any unique quality of the area?

The proposed alternative will not have a significant adverse impact on cultural uniqueness or diversity.

24. OTHER APPROPRIATE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES:

Estimate the return to the trust. Include appropriate economic analysis. Identify potential future uses for the analysis area other than existing management. Identify cumulative economic and social effects likely to occur as a result of the proposed action.

The Common Schools Trust will benefit by getting a one-time fee of $9,060 ($500/acre) for the Easement areas on the three subject parcels.

EA Checklist Prepared By:	Name: Jeff Bollman, AICP	Date: 3 June 2014
	Title: Area Planner, Southern Land Office	

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

After review, the proposed alternative has been selected and it is recommended that the three 60' easements be issued to NorthWestern Energy on the sections identified above for the purpose of constructing a 100kV overhead electric transmission line. This alternative can be implemented in a manner that is consistent with the long-term sustainable natural resource management of the area.

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

The potential for significant adverse impacts to the Trust lands listed above are minimal based on the above analysis and the nature of the proposed action which is to grant three 60' easements for a 100kV overhead electric transmission line. There are no natural features or species of concern that are expected to be significantly impacted and produce adverse impacts if the proposed action is implemented.

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

[ ]	EIS	[ ]	More Detailed EA	[X]	No Further Analysis

EA Checklist Approved By:	Name: Matthew Wolcott	
	Title: Area Manager, Southern Land Office	
Signature: /s/ Matthew Wolcott		**Date**: June 5, 2014